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SUBJECT: EMPEROR'S WORDS SPARK DEBATE ON YASUKUNI, HISTORY

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reason: 1.4 (B) (D)

11. (C) Summary: Revelation of a memo quoting the late Emperor Hirohito as saying his refusal to go to Yasukuni Shrine was directly related to the enshrinement there of Class-A war criminals is already reshaping Japan's debate on Yasukuni. The release of the memo has refocused the debate as a domestic issue, rather than a diplomatic one. It also provides perfect political cover for Prime Minister Koizumi's successors to eschew attendance at Yasukuni. If Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe, odds-on favorite to be Japan's next Prime Minister, seizes this opportunity, and we think he might, it would remove the single biggest irritant in Japan's relations with China and South Korea. In a broader sense, confirmation of Imperial displeasure with Yasukuni has already had a significant impact within Japan and could even help blunt the trend of historical revisionism. End summary.

12. (U) On July 20, the Nihon Keizai newspaper (Japan's Wall Street Journal) published a memo in which the late Emperor Hirohito, now posthumously referred to as the Emperor Showa, is quoted as saying that enshrinement of Class-A war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine in 1978 was the reason for his subsequent refusal to pay homage at the shrine, a position maintained by his son, the current Emperor. "That is why I've since stopped visiting (the shrine). That is how I feel in my heart," the Emperor is quoted as saying. The memo, dated April 28, 1988, was written by Tomohiko Tomita, a former Imperial Household Agency grand steward and close confidante of the emperor. The memo's authenticity and Emperor Hirohito's words are considered beyond question by virtually everyone in Japan.

13. (SBU) An immediate effect of Tomita's memo has been to revive debate about the propriety of visits to Yasukuni, particularly by a prime minister in his official capacity. Prime Minister Koizumi has made clear that the Tomita memo has not changed his views on paying respects at the shrine, which he is widely expected to do for the last time as prime minister on August 15. "To visit or not is an individual's choice. It is a matter of the heart," Koizumi told the press. Other politicians, however, aren't so sure, with many already expressing opposition to visiting the shrine or re-examining their positions. One thing is certain: the memo's confirmation that the late Emperor opposed enshrinement of Class-A war criminals at Yasukuni has had an effect on Japanese public opinion. Recent polls show that 60% of Japanese now oppose visits to Yasukuni by Koizumi's successors, while only 20% would support such visits. This contrasts sharply with results of a January poll in which

only 40% opposed the visits and 28% supported them. Another poll conducted by Mainichi Shimbun reveals that fully 63% of respondents now want the Class-A war criminals to be separated from the other war dead at Yasukuni.

¶4. (C) As the Asahi Shimbun pointed out in a recent editorial, the Tomita memo has had the beneficial effect of making Yasukuni and the related issue of an appropriate place for the war dead a domestic issue. "It is a question to which we Japanese must find an answer, before being told to do so by China or South Korea," according to the Asahi. In this connection, confirmation of Emperor Hirohito's position provides a golden opportunity for Koizumi's successors to eschew visiting the shrine in the official capacity of prime minister. The Emperor's words provide, in effect, perfect political cover for countering attacks from the right that might come with non-attendance. Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe has been careful to avoid taking a position on this issue in the run-up to the LDP presidential election. However, informed sources tell us Abe has already made up his mind not to pay homage at Yasukuni on August 15th, and he may never visit if he indeed becomes Prime Minister. If Abe adopts that position, and we believe there is a good chance he will, it would remove the single biggest irritant in Japan's relations with China and the Republic of Korea.

¶5. (C) For most Japanese, the question of where Emperor Hirohito stood on Yasukuni had been assumed for many years; after all, he paid homage at the shrine in the immediate post-war years, but then ceased going after Class-A war criminals were enshrined in 1978. Still, the Tomita memo containing the Emperor's own words has confirmed those rumors and put proponents on the defensive. In effect, it is the smoking gun that ends any debate about the Emperor's true feelings about Yasukuni and the responsibility of the Class-A war criminals enshrined there.

¶6. (C) Comment: We believe the Tomita memo quoting the late Emperor's words could spark a major debate on Japan's role in the war. For years, there has been growing revisionism about the war years and Japan's responsibility for the atrocities that occurred during it. One need go no further than the museum at Yasukuni Shrine to see a totally skewed view of 20th century history, in which Japan's actions are excused as those of a victim. The Tomita memo and perhaps other important revelations from documents he compiled, but which have yet to be published, could help blunt this trend toward historical revisionism. Already, one can sense that Emperor Hirohito's feeling of betrayal by enshrinement of the Class-A war criminals at Yasukuni has had a dramatic effect on Japanese public opinion, and we suspect this is only the beginning.
SCHIEFFER